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SUBJECT: REMOVAL OF AL ZAWRAA SATELLITE CHANNEL ON AGENDA OF
KUWAIT'S NEW MINISTER OF INFORMATION

REF: KUWAIT 002442

1. (SBU/NF) Summary and comment: The Ambassador met on May 9 with recently-appointed Minister of Information Abdullah Al-Muhailbi. The Ambassador pressed the Minister for action to remove the insurgent Iraqi channel Al Zawraa from Arabsat's offerings. (The GOK is a minority stakeholder.) Al-Muhailbi said that at next month's meeting of GCC Information Ministers he would present a memo to his regional counterparts calling for ArabSat to cease transmission of the channel. On other business, he agreed to move on a draft agreement between the IBB and Radio Kuwait to swap shortwave radio transmission program times. The Minister, who has no prior media experience, expressed respect for a free press, but stated his priority is to ensure that the private media adhere to the "government agenda." (Comment) Media commentators expect the low-key Al-Muhailbi to be less controversial than his predecessor who resigned after only nine months in office when MPs sought to force his ouster. The new Minister lightheartedly did not deny speculation that his appointment may have been due in part to the tribal connections he has with a number of members of parliament. End summary and comment.

2. (SBU/NF) On May 9, Ambassador met with recently appointed Minister of Information Abdullah Al-Muhailbi and congratulated him on his appointment to the high-profile Ministry that is often the target of criticism from both sides of the political spectrum. The Ambassador raised the issue of the broadcasting to Kuwait of the insurgent satellite channel Al Zawraa on ArabSat. Ambassador expressed disgust with the violent images shown on the channel and appealed to the Minister to raise the issue with ArabSat, of which the Government of Kuwait is a stakeholder (we believe fifteen percent). Al-Muhailbi said he shares the Ambassador's concerns and is in full agreement that what Al Zawraa broadcasts is unacceptable. He reported that the issue was raised at the last meeting of GCC Information Ministers. Al-Muhailbi said that at the next ministers meeting, scheduled for late May in Riyadh, he would present a memo to his regional colleagues calling for ArabSat to cease transmitting the channel. He also mentioned the possibility of scrambling the signal and inquired if the U.S. might provide technical assistance. The Ambassador expressed a willingness to provide any assistance to address this serious concern.

3. (SBU/NF) The Ambassador asked for the Minister's help in pushing through a U.S.-Kuwaiti radio time swap agreement that has been languishing

in the Ministry' Legal Department. It calls for IBB and Radio Kuwait to swap shortwave radio transmitter program times so that U.S. programs could be broadcast to Kuwait and the region and Radio Kuwait in turn could reach Kuwaiti audiences in the U.S., Australia, and elsewhere. Al-Muhailbi stated his support for the initiative and said he will direct the agreement to go through.

¶4. (SBU/NF) In sharing his priorities as Minister, Al-Muhailbi, who has no prior media experience, shed light on his views of the role of the press in Kuwait. He paid tribute to press freedom while at the same time indicating an expectation that the private media toe the government line. He described Kuwaiti society as conservative but "open to the world" and "passionate" about freedom of expression. Al-Muhailbi said he respected other opinions, but that his priorities as Minister are to encourage the Kuwait media to "focus on Kuwaiti issues," to "avoid exaggeration and twisting of facts, especially with regard to Iran," and to heed the "government agenda." Asked to comment on Kuwait's new press law, which journalists and editors complain places undue restrictions on press freedom, Al-Muhailbi commented that the law has only been in effect for eight months. He said that he is aware of the concerns that editors have and that he will report these views to parliament. He summed up the issue by saying the new law is "good" and that any possible modification would be designed to increase press freedom. As for improving the quality of Kuwait's journalists, the minister expressed a desire to expand successful training programs initiated by the Embassy Public Affairs Section in collaboration with KUNA, the state news agency, and the Kuwait Journalists Association (KJA).

¶5. (SBU/NF) Biographic Information: The 43-year-old Al-Muhailbi was an unexpected choice for the Minister of Information portfolio because, while he has prior government experience, he has no background in the media. A former Minister of Municipal Affairs, he had previously been elected to the Municipal Council and appointed Chairman. He holds a B.A. in geography from Kuwait University and a teaching certificate from the Teacher's College in Kuwait. He is also a founding member of the Volunteer Health Society, a member of the board of the Public Fund Protection Society and he sits on the board of the Rumaithiya city cooperative board.

¶6. (U) Al-Muhailbi heads a Ministry that consists of four principal entities: The Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), the official news service; the Foreign Press Centers (FPCs), which serve as resources on Kuwait for foreign media; five public television stations; and 16 public radio stations.

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LEBARON